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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST BATTALION, 149TH INFANTRY  
(38TH INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE BATTLE FOR THE BURI  
AIR STRIP, LEYTE, P. I., 7-11 DECEMBER 1944  
(LEYTE ISLAND CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: INFANTRY BATTALION EMPLOYED  
AGAINST AN ENEMY GROUND AND VERTICAL ATTACK

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 1st Battalion, 149th Infantry, 38th Infantry Division, in the Battle for Buri Air Strip, Leyte, Philippine Islands, 7-11 December 1944.

The liberation of the Philippines was of utmost importance to the successful prosecution of World War II in the Pacific Theater. General of the Army Douglas MacArthur's statement "I shall return" became a reality on 20 October 1944. On that date the X and XXIV Corps of Lieutenant General Walter Krueger's Sixth Army stormed ashore on the east coast of the Island of Leyte. (See Map A)

The 1st Cavalry Division and the 24th Infantry Division of the X Corps landed in the Tacloban and Palo area, quickly seized their initial objectives and consolidated the beachhead. (1)

The 7th and 96th Infantry Divisions of the XXIV Corps landed in the Dulag area and established themselves so firmly on the beach that the success of the landing was never in doubt. (2)

GENERAL SITUATION

It soon became evident, however, that Japan intended to defend the Island of Leyte at all costs. (3) Opposing the initial American landings were the Japanese 16th Infantry Division and a separate tank company. These Japanese troops were reinforced during the next few months despite heavy losses in the attempt. In order to maintain numerical superiority it became necessary for the U. S. Sixth Army to reinforce the American forces to include the newly arrived 77th and 32d Infantry Divi-

(1) A-1, p. 32; (2) A-1, p. 32; (3) A-1, pp. 40-41.

sions and the 11th Airborne Division. (4)

The 32d Infantry Division was committed in the northern part of the island. The 77th Infantry Division, under direct control of Sixth Army was alerted to attack the vital port of Ormoc on the west side of the Island. (5) The 11th Airborne Division was assigned to the XXIV Corps and committed to relieve the 7th Infantry Division.

In spite of ever increasing enemy resistance and heavy tropical rains, which turned the few available roads into quagmires of mud, the XXIV Corps was able to inch its way westward and by 6 December 1944 held a north-south line generally west of Burauen. (See Map B)

#### ARRIVAL OF 149TH RCT

Meanwhile the U. S. 38th Infantry Division, under direct control of AFPAC, was preparing to move from New Guinea to Leyte where it was to stage for a future operation.

The movement of the division to Leyte was echeloned by regimental combat teams with the 149th RCT leading. On 5 December 1944 when this RCT was one day off of Leyte it was hit hard in a day-long attack by Japanese Kamikaze flyers. (6) The 3d Battalion of this RCT suffered many casualties in this attack but all of the ships of the convoy were able to reach port near Bito on 6 December. (See Map B)

#### JAPANESE COUNTERATTACK

The American forces on Leyte learned from enemy documents captured on 26 November that the Japanese planned to launch a coordinated air, land, and sea attack. This counterattack was to coincide with Pearl Harbor Day. It had as its initial objective the capture of the air fields on Leyte. There was to be a ground attack which was designed to drive the American forces into the sea. (7)

(4) A-1, p. 64; (5) A-1, pp. 69-70; (6) A-12; (7) A-1, pp. 64, 72.

The information gained from the captured documents enabled the American air forces to spot the Japanese transports carrying the seaborne troops for this counterattack as they neared the northwest coast of Leyte. The air force was able to sink most of the transports in this convoy. Two thousand to three thousand Japanese soldiers were all that got ashore. (8)

The enemy air phase of this counterattack fared somewhat better although forty-nine Japanese air transports were shot down during the evening of 6 December. Approximately two hundred and fifty airborne troops did succeed in landing in the Bureauen area, approximately eight miles in rear of 11th Airborne Division front lines. (9)

The Japanese ground attack was so successfully beaten off by the American forces that only a few hundred Japanese soldiers got through to join the air-landed troops in the Bureauen area. (10) (See Map B)

#### PLAN FOR THE REDUCTION OF THE COUNTERATTACK

The area recaptured by the enemy was in the zone of the 11th Airborne Division; consequently, that unit was charged with the responsibility of clearing the Japanese from the area. (See Map B)

The 11th Airborne Division, having been infiltrated by the enemy ground troops and having its troops deployed over an area extending for almost thirty miles, requested through channels that the newly arrived 149th Infantry Regiment be attached to the division for employment against the enemy troops in the Bureauen area. (11)

The request was granted to the extent that the 149th Infantry was released by AFPAC to Sixth Army who in turn attached the 1st and 2d Battalions to the 11th Airborne Division. The 3d Battalion of this Regiment had been hit hard by the Japanese Kamikaze attack on 5 December and was not in condition to fight at this time. The Regimental Commander and his Headquarters were not included in this attachment. (12)

(8) A-1, p. 79; (9) A-14, pp. 18-19 and Map B; (10) A-11; (11) A-1, p. 72; (12) A-11;

Bito beach, while affording a place for troops to land, had no port facilities and local labor for unloading ships was not available. The job of unloading the ships, therefore, was done by combat troops. At this time the job was assigned to the 2d Battalion. This left only the 1st Battalion free to join the 11th Airborne Division. This Battalion was alerted at 0200 hours 7 December for movement to San Pablo airstrip in the Buraen area. (13)

#### PREPARATION FOR THE ATTACK

The battalion, while not battle tested, had been well trained in jungle warfare in Hawaii and New Guinea. (14)

The battalion commander believed that the engagement in the Buraen area would not be an extended effort for the battalion; therefore, mess, supply and administrative personnel were left at Bito beach.

The troops were issued one K ration and extra ammunition. This included grenades and two bandoleers for the riflemen and a small amount of mortar and machine gun ammunition.

Due to the rain soaked condition of the roads the movement of the battalion to Dulag was made by sea in amtracks. (15) (See Map B)

Upon landing at Dulag the battalion was met by a sufficient number of two and one-half ton trucks to move the battalion, less B Company and elements of D Company. A few miles west of Dulag the trucks bogged down in the mud, forcing the troops to march the remaining six miles to San Pablo air strip. The elements left at Dulag were to march to San Pablo and join the battalion later. (16) (See Map B)

At San Pablo airstrip the advance elements of the battalion were met by Major General Joseph Swing whose greeting and order to the battalion was, "Glad to see you. I am General Swing of the 11th Airborne Division. We've been having a hell of a time here. Last night approximately seventy

(13) Personal knowledge; (14) (15) (16) Personal knowledge.

five Jap paratroopers dropped on us of which we have accounted for about fifty. Fifteen hundred yards from here on an azimuth of 273° is another airstrip just like this one. Between here and there are about twenty-five Jap troopers. It is now 1400. I want that strip secure by nightfall." (17)

Reconnaissance of the terrain over which the attack was to be launched was impractical because of the time element. All that was known to the battalion was that fifteen hundred yards from where they were was another airstrip and a reported twenty-five Japanese were between them and their objective.

In a conference with the two available rifle company commanders and the D Company Commander, the battalion commander issued the following order: The battalion was to attack immediately with two companies abreast, A on the right with approximately two hundred yards frontage per company. The line of departure was the northwest side of San Pablo Strip. D Company would support the attack with the 81 mm mortar platoon from positions on the San Pablo Strip. A section of heavy machine guns was attached to each of the rifle companies. Since it was believed that the attack would last only a matter of hours excess equipment, such as gas masks and individual packs, was to be left on the San Pablo Strip. The battalion command post (rear) under the battalion executive officer was to remain at San Pablo Strip. The battalion command group was to accompany C Company. Communications to the rear were to be by both wire and radio. (18) (See Map C)

#### THE ATTACK

(7 December)

The attack jumped off at about 1430 hours. The first five hundred yards were covered without incident. At this point a swamp was encountered. (17) (18) Personal knowledge.



Due to the heavy rains, it was in a flooded condition and proved difficult to cross. Numerous attempts were made to by-pass it but to no avail. The only alternative therefore was to cross it. The water in places was shoulder deep and had the battalion been attacked while crossing this swamp the result could have been disastrous. (See Map C)

Contact between companies was lost in negotiating the swamp. Upon reaching the far side of the swamp the A Company Commander, learning that contact had been lost, decided to proceed with A Company and arrived on the near side of Buri Air Strip at about 1630 hours. (See Map C) Much enemy activity could be seen on the far side of the strip and it soon became apparent that many more Japanese were in the area than had been estimated by General Swing. The A Company Commander relayed this information by radio to the battalion commander and asked for instructions. The battalion commander stated that he would soon join A Company and to do nothing until he arrived. Meanwhile C Company had been delayed by a light skirmish and did not arrive at Buri Strip until about 1800 hours.

The battalion command group joined A Company at about 1700 hours and, after making a hasty estimate of the situation, the battalion commander decided that it would be unwise to attack with one company at that late hour.

When C Company arrived at the Buri Strip the battalion commander ordered the two companies to form a perimeter defense for the night. (See Map D)

Plans were made for the attack next day and the order was issued about 1900 hours. One platoon from A Company was to go around the right end of the strip. C Company and the remainder of A Company were to attack frontally across the strip at 0800 hours 8 December.

The inexperienced battalion spent a sleepless night within its perimeter. The Japanese had by this time become aware of the presence of the Americans on the south edge of the airstrip. The battalion was

harassed all night by Japanese who infiltrated and at times got inside the perimeter and caused havoc by throwing grenades at the battalion installations. Adding to the confusion was the fact that the enemy had captured an undetermined amount of American ammunition and weapons when they descended on the strip. It was impossible to distinguish between Japanese and American firing. During the night the battalion uselessly fired many rounds of ammunition against the infiltrating Japanese. This was regretted later when the ammunition supply ran very low. By daylight on 8 December every member of the battalion was convinced that there were several hundred Japanese in the area.

(8 December)

The attack on 8 December moved off as scheduled. The 2d Platoon from A Company moved to the right and had reached the end of the strip. At this point they were mistakenly identified by an American artillery air observer as Japanese troops. The observer immediately began to adjust artillery fire on this platoon. It is presumed that this artillery belonged to the 11th Airborne Division. The platoon leader was able to extricate his platoon from this fire with only two slightly wounded men. He then, on his own initiative, brought the platoon back to the positions occupied on the previous night. (See Map D)

O Company and the remainder of A Company advanced across the open runway without any difficulty but immediately upon entering the dense jungle on the far side of the strip they were hit by devastating small arms and mortar fire from well concealed Japanese positions and after a sharp fire fight were forced to withdraw across Buri Air Strip to the positions occupied the previous night. (See Map D)

The battalion elements, that had been dropped off at Dulag because of the shortage of transportation, arrived at San Pablo Air Strip late in the afternoon of 7 December. (See Map C) B Company remained at the

airstrip to protect the installations of the 11th Airborne Division that were located there. At about 1000 hours 8 December, B Company received orders from the 11th Airborne Division, through the battalion rear CP, to investigate a rumor that Japanese were concentrating at a point approximately eight hundred yards northeast of the San Pablo Air Strip. (See Map O) Upon checking this area, B Company found no evidence of Japanese troops and contacted the battalion rear CP for further instructions. They were told to remain in their present location and await orders.

Meanwhile the Regimental Commander, 149th Infantry, visited Headquarters, 11th Airborne Division, at San Pablo Air Strip arriving at about 1200 hours 8 December. In a conference with the CG, 11th Airborne Division, he learned that the general was displeased with the manner in which the 1st Battalion was performing its mission. The General reiterated his statement made earlier that there were only twenty-five Japanese troops opposing the battalion and he thought the mission should have been completed prior to this time. Since the battalion had been detached from the regiment, the regimental commander had to request permission before he could make an investigation. He also requested that he be allowed some degree of control over his battalion. These requests were granted. The regimental commander then visited the G-2, 11th Airborne Division, who stated that there were six hundred and fifty Japanese opposing the 1st Battalion, 149th Infantry. (19)

The regimental commander immediately returned to General Swing and informed him of the G-2's estimate of the enemy strength. After the general had confirmed this figure from his G-2, the regimental commander recommended that the 2d Battalion, 149th Infantry, which had completed unloading the ships at Bito, be brought to the Burauen area. He also recommended that B Company be permitted to join the 1st Battalion at the Buri Strip. Both of these recommendations were approved and B Company joined the 1st Battalion (19) A-11.

at approximately 1600 hours 8 December. The 2d Battalion arrived at the San Pablo Strip the next day and was used for local security and for extensive patrolling throughout the area. (20)

The regimental commander ordered the 1st Battalion to consolidate its position during the remaining hours of daylight 8 December and to be prepared to launch a frontal attack with two companies the next day. (21)

The 1st Battalion commander's plan of attack for 9 December was similar to that of 8 December. A and B Companies were to attack frontally at 0800 hours with A Company on the right. C Company was to remain in place in battalion reserve. The attack was to be preceded by a five minute mortar preparation fired by the 81 mm mortar platoon located back on the San Pablo Strip. (22)

The experiences of the night of 8-9 December were similar to those of the previous night. As soon as darkness fell, the enemy began to harass the perimeter by throwing grenades at the outer positions. The men of the battalion had learned, however, from the previous night to withhold their retaliatory fire unless it was necessary for self preservation.

(9 December)

The attack on 9 December was launched as scheduled and again the attacking companies crossed the open runway without drawing fire. Efforts to penetrate the thick jungle growth on the far side of the strip, however, were met with the same heavy fire as the day before, but this time both companies were able to cut their way through the brush for a few yards before they were stopped by superior enemy fire and again forced to withdraw across the strip to the old perimeter. (See Map D)

A shortage of ammunition prohibited making another attack 9 December. (20) and (21) A-11; (22) Personal knowledge.

The remainder of the day was spent in treating the casualties and burying the dead. Japanese patrols had infiltrated between the battalion and San Pablo Strip, making it difficult to evacuate the wounded and the dead.

All efforts, up to this time, to resupply the Battalion had been futile, but late in the afternoon of 9 December a pack train arrived from San Pablo Strip with ammunition and K rations. This was the first resupply the battalion had received in three days. This pack train also brought up one 81 mm mortar with fifty rounds of ammunition.

About the same time the pack train arrived, the regimental commander landed on the strip in a cub plane despite the fact that one side of the strip was still in the hands of the enemy, who fired at the plane as it was landing.

No casualties had as yet been evacuated and it had been necessary to bury the dead almost within the perimeter. This, plus the fact that it had rained constantly, had a marked effect on the morale of the men. The visit of the regimental commander proved of inestimable value in improving this morale.

The regimental commander before leaving the strip ordered that another attack be made the next day and dictated the plan of maneuver to the battalion commander. The 81 mm mortar brought up by the pack train was to be used against known points of enemy-resistance. Two companies would again attack frontally across the strip, this time executing a turning movement to the left on the far side of the strip. (23)

The returning pack train evacuated the casualties and the battalion settled down to another night in the jungle much like the two previous ones.

(23) A-11.

(10 December)

*Map E*  
In implementing the regimental commander's plan of maneuver, the battalion commander ordered A and C Companies to attack at 0800 hours with C Company on the right and B Company in Battalion reserve. The turning movement to the left was to be hinged on A Company.

The two companies moved out as scheduled. Again the movement across the runway was without incident. The turning movement was partially completed when for some unknown reason A Company became involved in a fire fight with B Company. Several minutes had elapsed before the respective commanders could convince their men that they were actually firing at each other.

This turning maneuver while very difficult to execute in the dense jungle proved surprisingly effective. The two companies completed the maneuver, aligned themselves and moved to the west methodically reducing the enemy strong points encountered. They had advanced approximately one hundred and fifty yards when approaching darkness forced them to start preparations for their defense for the night. (See Map E)

Since the battalion now had troops on both sides of the strip the runway was comparatively safe and during the early evening of 10 December several cub planes flew in with supplies and evacuated the remaining casualties.

The battalion plan for the resumption of the attack on 11 December was communicated to A and C Companies by radio. The battalion commander ordered A and C Companies to resume their advance to the west at 0800 hours 11 December, clean out the remaining enemy in the area and return to the southeast side of Buri Air Strip. B Company would cross the strip, turn right and clean out the Japanese in that area.

A and C Companies spent the night where darkness had halted their advance. B Company and the battalion command group spent the night in

the old perimeter.

(11 December)

The attack for the fifth and what proved to be the last day of this operation was launched at 0800 hours. There was less enemy resistance against the battalion than there had been at any time since its arrival in the Burauen area. What were once strong enemy defenses were taken in stride by A and C Companies. By 1200 hours the battle was reduced to mopping up the area.

B Company was equally successful, gaining momentum as it pushed to the right, circled the right end of the strip and returned to the old perimeter. (See Map E)

A and C Companies closed in the old perimeter area at about 1400 hours. (See Map E)

The 2d Battalion assumed responsibility for the entire area and at 1430 hours relieved the tired and weary 1st Battalion which moved to Burauen for a much needed rest. The battle for Buri Air Strip was over.

(24)

#### SUMMARY

Three hundred enemy dead were found in the area after the operation was over and a reported two hundred more Japanese were forced to withdraw from Buri Air Strip to the interior of the island. During the battle the 1st Battalion had lost forty men killed and approximately one hundred were wounded. (25) It had required five days to accomplish a job that was supposed to have taken only a few hours. In view of the fact that this battalion was fighting a force almost as large as itself without support and was without combat experience, it is felt that the job was accomplished as expeditiously as could be expected.

(24) Personal knowledge; (25) A-13.

In five days of hard bitter fighting the 1st Battalion, 149th Infantry, had received its battle indoctrination.

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

A study of this operation will disclose that the factors of paramount importance which affected the various phases of this operation are as follows:

1. The enemy counterattack.
2. A faulty estimate of enemy strength.
3. The attachment of the major portion of a regiment without including the regimental commander and his staff.
4. The conduct of the attack on Buri Air Strip by the 1st Battalion.

The enemy plan for the counterattack was basically sound. If the complete plan for the maneuver had not fallen into American hands, its execution would have been infinitely more successful. It is believed that the Japanese forces made two mistakes:

1. Permitting a complete copy of the plan of attack to be taken into Leyte by an advanced echelon of the counterattacking force. (American troops captured this plan eleven days before the attack) (26)
2. Insisting upon the doubtful psychological value of launching the counterattack to coincide with Pearl Harbor Day causing them to disregard weather conditions.

General Swing's original estimate of twenty-five Japanese at Buri Air Strip was proved to be completely in error. It is believed that the 1st Battalion, 149th Infantry, in its preparation for the attack, took adequate steps to cope with twenty-five Japanese. The enemy strength of six hundred and fifty estimated by the G-2, 11th Airborne Division, proved to be approximately correct. The three hundred enemy dead found in the area after the operation plus the reported two hundred that withdrew to the (26) A-1, p. 64.



interior of the island totalled at least five hundred.

There is no excuse for the G-2, 11th Airborne Division, in not keeping his CG advised as to the estimated enemy strength in the Buri Air Strip area. Had the battalion been informed of the larger estimate of enemy strength, their preparations for the attack would have been more thorough.

The failure to initially include the Regimental Headquarters in the attachment of the two battalions of the 149th Infantry to the 11th Airborne Division cannot be overlooked. The regimental commander, learned upon his arrival at San Pablo Air Strip 8 December that his battalion was being criticised but he was without authority to do anything about it. He found it necessary therefore to request that he be given permission by the 11th Airborne Division in order that he could advise and help the 1st Battalion.

The conduct of the attack on Buri Air Strip by the 1st Battalion, 149th Infantry, can be characterized by the following factors:

1. Lack of aggressive leadership.
2. Neglect of resupply.
3. Inadequate fire plan.
4. Inability to evacuate casualties.
5. Unsound plan of maneuver.
6. Lack of combat experience.

It is evident that the battalion commander lacked the necessary aggressive leadership to push this attack through to an early successful conclusion. It is believed that the decision not to attack the strip with one company on 7 December was sound. The attack on 8 December, however, should have been pushed more aggressively. The same thing was true on 9 December. Had either of these attacks been characterized by good strong leadership it is possible that they could have been successful.

*not well supported*

The same criticism can be leveled at the platoon and company commanders.

Very little consideration was given to the resupply necessary to sustain the battalion during this operation. Initially it was believed that the mission could be accomplished in a few hours; therefore, supply would not be a problem. However, when it was learned that a prolonged effort would be required some provision should have been made to resupply the battalion regularly.

The decision to leave the 81 mm mortar platoon at the San Pablo Air Strip was sound. However, frequent failure of communications to the rear left the battalion at times without the support of this platoon. The possibility of artillery support was completely ignored. Nevertheless, it was available as evidenced by the artillery fired on the 2d Platoon of A Company on 8 December.

The inability of the battalion to evacuate the wounded and remove the dead bodies had a marked effect on the morale of the men. It is believed that some provision to accomplish this should have been made even if it required the use of combat troops from the battalion.

The decision of the battalion commander to attack frontally across the air strip is believed unsound. Basic tactical doctrine dictates an envelopment with part of the battalion employed as a base of fire.

The fact that this battalion lacked combat experience is appreciated. Its initial combat mission proved to be a very difficult one. Units in their initial combat are likely to be committed to tough assignments and should make every effort to instill realism in their training.

#### LESSONS

1. Copies of operation orders should not be taken into forward combat areas where their compromise or capture may jeopardize the success of the operation.

2. Staffs must keep their commanders informed of the estimated enemy strength opposing their units.

3. Commanders should accept staff estimates of enemy strength unless sufficient evidence to the contrary is available.

4. Whenever the major portion of a unit is attached to another unit its headquarters should also be attached to facilitate command and control.

5. Supply in an isolated operation is of prime importance and cannot be overlooked; supply lines must be kept open.

6. Every infantry attack regardless of size should have a coordinated fire plan.

7. Casualties should be evacuated even if combat troops are required to perform the task.

8. The dead should not be buried on or near positions occupied by friendly troops.

9. Frontal attacks should be used only as a last resort.

10. Promiscuous firing of weapons at night should be avoided.

11. Liaison planes in an emergency can be used for resupply missions and to evacuate casualties.

12. Every unit commander must be aggressive; he must by precept and example impinge upon his men the will to fight.